

Quick Facts

About... Cholera (*Vibrio cholerae*)

What is cholera?

Cholera is a contagious diarrheal disease caused by toxins produced by certain *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria. These bacteria are mainly found in humans although the bacteria may be found in brackish water and estuaries. Shellfish found in United States coastal waters can be contaminated with *V. cholerae*. Cholera is extremely rare in the United States and is almost always related to travel to areas of the world where cholera is common, such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

How is cholera spread?

V. cholerae is passed in the stool, and people become infected by ingesting stool from an infected person (fecal-oral route). *V. cholerae* is usually transmitted by ingesting food or water contaminated with feces or vomit of infected persons, such as through sewage contamination. Water contaminated with *V. cholerae* can contaminate shellfish and raw produce.

Although direct person-to-person spread is unlikely, cholera could possibly be transmitted as long as stools test positive for *V. cholerae*, most likely until a few days after symptoms stop. Shedding of bacteria may occasionally persist for several months.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

- Mild to severe watery diarrhea (“rice-water stool”)
- Vomiting
- Dehydration

The symptoms usually begin within 2-3 days (range of a few hours to 5 days) after exposure. Fever is usually absent. Infection with *V. cholerae* often results in asymptomatic or mild illness involving only diarrhea.

Approximately 1 out of 20 infected people will develop more severe illness characterized by profuse watery diarrhea, nausea, some vomiting, and leg cramps. The rapid loss of body fluids can cause dehydration and shock in the most severe cases. Without rehydration therapy, death can result within hours. The case-fatality rate in severe, untreated cases may exceed 50%; however, with prompt rehydration, the rate is less than 1%.

How do I know if I have cholera?

A person having profuse, watery diarrhea should consult a health care provider immediately. The health care provider may collect a stool sample to test for *V. cholerae* if there are known exposures to

international travel or raw shellfish. If you are traveling in a foreign country, call the nearest United States embassy for a list of health care providers.

How is cholera treated?

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by immediate replacement of the fluid and salts lost through diarrhea. Patients can be treated with oral rehydration solution, a prepackaged mixture of sugar and salts to be mixed with water and drunk in large amounts. This solution is used throughout the world to treat diarrhea. Severe cases also require intravenous fluid replacement. Antibiotics shorten the course and diminish the severity of the illness, but they are not as important as rehydration.

Is cholera a reportable disease?

Yes. Health care providers and laboratories must immediately report cases of *V. cholerae* to the local health department (LHD) or the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH). The LHD will contact all cases diagnosed with cholera, so a possible exposure can be determined to help prevent others from becoming ill.

How can cholera be prevented?

- Practice good hygiene:
 - Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water after using the restroom, after assisting someone with diarrhea and/or vomiting, and after diapering children (please refer to [Quick Facts about Hand Washing](#)).
 - Clean food preparation work surfaces, equipment, and utensils with soap and water before, during, and after food preparation, especially after contamination with raw shellfish.
- Eat safe foods and drink safe water (Remember: Contaminated foods may look and smell normal):
 - Use treated water for washing, cooking, and drinking.
 - Wash all produce before eating raw or cooking.
 - Do not eat uncooked shellfish or fish, including ceviche.
 - Avoid swallowing untreated water from recreational areas, such as oceans, lakes, etc.
- Protect others:
 - Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting should not prepare food or provide health care for others and should limit direct contact with others as much as possible.
 - Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting should not attend a day-care facility or school.

- Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting shall be excluded from employment involving food handling (Indiana Retail Food Establishment Sanitation Requirements, 410 IAC 7-24-122).
- Do not change diapers near recreational water.
- Do not go swimming or use hot tubs if you have diarrhea and for at least 2 weeks after diarrhea stops.
- Safe travel outside of the United States:
 - Drink bottled beverages and water, even when brushing teeth.
 - Do not consume local water or ice.
 - Do not eat uncooked fruits or vegetables unless you peel them yourself.
 - Do not eat foods or beverages from street vendors.
 - Do not bring raw produce or shellfish back into the United States.

Where can I learn more about cholera?

To search Indiana data and statistics:

www.in.gov/isdh/dataandstats/disease/diseases_index.htm

To search disease information:

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_cholera.htm

www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/chap7.html

To search for national data, statistics, and outbreaks:

www.cdc.gov/mmwr/

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